

God Is Not Orthodox

Let me begin by saying that I am what I am because I was what I was. I am a Syrian Orthodox Christian because my parents were Syrian, Orthodox, and Christian.

The first step to know your Creator is to realize that He has no religion. Ascribing qualities to Him or describing Him in the phrases and thoughts you are familiar with is to limit Him to the straitjacket of your mindset.

I preach in churches and temples. The theme that I choose may vaguely fall into the vocabulary of the respective religion, but there ends the difference. I explain Biblical or Christian thoughts drawing from my knowledge of the Hindu scriptures and epics. I speak on the Gita or the Bhagavatam drawing from the Bible. In both cases my audience does not realize what I am doing. When I explain Yoga: karmasaukshyam using a statement reported from Jesus about doing one's duty without claiming any credit personally my audience at the temple does not know that I am quoting the Bible. When I use ekaslokeegita, the last stanza in the Gita, to explain the Parable of the Talents my audience at the church is surprised that "our" concept of the talents finds a place in an "alien" religious text.

Religion is the product of man's quest for answers. Every religion has three components. Who is God, how is God to be propitiated, and how a believer should conduct himself. The first essentially refers to faith in God. That there is God. That God is Creator, Sustainer and 'Destroyer'/Disposer/Ultimate Judge. All theistic persuasions are united in holding that there is God who controls everything. And the last is about conduct. No religion advocates adultery, or murder, or anything wrong. The difference between any two religions is only in the explanation of what God is like, and how God is

to be worshipped and propitiated. Once this is understood it would be easy to understand what I

said earlier, that God has no religion. Note that Archbishop Tutu has a book titled "God Is Not A Christian".

Indeed, If God were a Christian he would be younger than Jesus Christ. If God were a Muslim he would be younger than the Venerable Prophet. If God were a Hindu(as the term is commonly understood now) he would be younger than the Vedic civilization. But God pre-existed religions, and is therefore beyond all religions. We may call him Yahweh but he called himself 'I am that I am'. He has no name as I have one. He is beyond all names.

Our forefathers as they stood erect and as their brain began to develop began this search. First they identified the invisible powers in nature as God. And the inexplicable phenomena. Finally they came to imagine God as a human being. A superman, as it were. One who could do what they could not. One who could avoid all pitfalls they could not. All virtues and no vices. The ideal that man wished to actualize. The guide that would show the way and remove all obstacles. The Vigneswaran. Lord of all obstacles or vighnams.

Vigneswaran is Ganapati. The 'Elephant God' as the uninitiated would describe. The form of the divine that has a nose elongated like the trunk of the pachyderm. Elephant is an animal that the Europeans had never set eyes on. That is why they call the lion king among animals. Actually the elephant is the king. A single elephant can kill a lion, but it takes three lions to kill an elephant. Be that as it may. The elephant



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is huge. Any path the elephant can traverse a man can too. The elephant, unlike a horse or even a cow, will not kick with hind legs anyone who follows him. Will not let down a follower. So in the minds of some of our ancestors God was like an elephant whom you can follow without fear; he will take care of all obstacles. But God had to be a man. So our forefathers in India gave him a long trunk of a nose.

The author of Genesis created God like himself, but cleverly said that God made man in His fashion. God has no name, and no figure according to the Bible. But when he created man he created him with the form of a man. Genesis explains that God would take evening walks with man and chat with him, until he ate the Forbidden Fruit. And thereafter man became man and God remained God.

Thus the search went on. And various civilizations explained God in various ways. Ancient sages of India said, "ekam sat vipra: bahudha vidanti." When they said this there was neither Christianity nor Buddhism. They were referring to various gods known as Indran or Agni or Varunan and saying that they were all one. Today we deem all these 'bahudha vidanti' as part of the Hindu pantheon and understand the vedic statement to have an ecumenical sense.

The Bible did not have a monotheistic vision always. It was pagan before God revealed Himself to Abraham. Even after Abraham for many centuries the Bible shows a henotheistic dimension. There are gods and gods, but there is one true god, that is Yahweh. The 'only true god' became 'the only God' even much later.

Lord Ramakrishnaparamahamsar used the analogy of a picture to illustrate this point that sages explain differently the same truth, ekam sat vipra: bahudha vadanti. I shall transfer the lesson to the twenty first century. Take a look at the different photographs of an object. What appears and how it is determined by the location of the photographer and the angle at which he

holds the camera. The object photographed does not change, but the image captured is not the same.

Let me give another illustration. The Englishman walks to his office in the morning, at say 8 a.m., enjoying the light sun. At the same time, five and a half hours east of the GMT an Indian walks home for lunch, cursing the scorching sun. When he protects himself by an umbrella a young couple sit on the beach in New Zealand watching the beautiful sunset. One sun, three perspectives. The Englishman has no right to say that the morning sun alone is real, and the Indian and the New Zealander should obtain a visa and enter Britain and look up to see what the sun really looks like. Nor can we in India say that he will understand what sun is like only if he comes to our geographical coordinates.

I am a Christian, albeit by accident, or chance. And I must be faithful as a Christian. When I say that I am a pluralist I do not mean that I am indifferent to my religion. I begin my day, before leaving bed, reciting a prayer crafted by the Syrian fathers. "O Lord of all things, keep me this day free from sin and impurity. "And I observe the Lent. I practice all rituals and follow all regulations. But I respect my neighbor who recites the Gayatri, who observes the Mandalavritam to go to Sabarimala, who prays to Vishnu or Ganapati instead of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. I am not merely tolerating him. That involves a certain condescension. I am not being inclusive as a theologian. That involves a certain sense of superiority. I accept his God as God, period. Because there is only one God. God may judge man- I am not too sure about the Last Judgment though, that is another issue- but man cannot judge God to graduate him as the true God. Remember what St. Teresa of Kolkatta said famously. "I love all religions; I am in love with my religion".

In other words, I hasten to add that I am a Christian. I have a personal relationship with

Jesus, and Mary. When I have a problem I take it to Him, sometimes directly, sometimes through her. I do not go to the Ganapati temple, though I admire that concept of Vigneswaran. Nor do I go to a mosque although I have great respect for the Razool. But I do not accept that my Hindu friend or Muslim friend is praying to a god alien to or in competition with my God. There is only one God.

I accept that it is not easy to understand this. The rivers do not realize that all rivers have the same water until they all become part of the one water-mass on the earth. Periyar and Ganga are different as long as they exist separately but they are one once they merge with the oceanic waters. Neither their course nor the point of merger, the Arabian Sea or the Bay of Bengal, is important once the event of merger is over. And, for that matter, is Periyar or Ganga the same, today, tomorrow and for ever? Not at all. None can cross the same river twice, the sages say. The water that you touch now is gone the next moment. And if that water was the river that you knew then it is not the same river when you have a different set of molecules as your water at another point in time. The mysterious thing is that even the river would know it only after it ceases to be a river and becomes a part of the ocean.

Now look at this from another angle. We live on the earth. What is this earth? A planet. Part of the solar system. Defined by its distance from the sun. What is the sun? A star. One among trillions of them. There could be other suns and other solar systems. There could be life elsewhere. And that life may not be the kind of life we know. We talk of extra terrestrial beings often as if they were like us, take or leave a few details. How do we know? And God. The one God who created everything and sustains everything is essentially incomprehensible. We do not know, and we cannot know. Once this limitation is accepted we should be able to understand that what we understand is what we can understand.

I have my regular meditation every morning. Some days, not every day, I leave my body on this chair and fly off. Before I leave here I look at my body and convince myself that it is a strange form, distinct from me. Sometimes it is easy and instantaneous, sometimes it is difficult and sometimes it is impossible and I give up. But once I feel free in midair then I go to Thekkadi Forests, or Vanautu in the South Pacific where I have never been, or Gangtok, Timbuctu or ShangriLa. To meet my mother, and my father. Sometimes Jesus joins us. We have a great time together. The other day, I saw a young boy playing a flute, a boy with a mischievous smile. He was looking at me. I recognized him at once. His name is Krishnan. Jesus, Krishnan, Paulose Corepiscopa, Mary Paul and Babu Paul. Great fun. I did not feel like returning to my body in this room. That is the Bliss, and the Ecstasy, the indescribable unlimited joy. Joy that has no religion.

Love your religion, and love the Other's. Periyar and Ganga constitute one mass when they lose their temporary existence as individual rivers. Man as an intelligent being should be able to visualize that even while flowing along different latitudes and longitudes.

Father Reymundo Panikkar, the great scholar, son of a Panikkar from Palakkad and a Catholic from Spain spent a long time in this country. He said something to the effect that 'he was a Catholic when he left Europe, was a Hindu when he lived in India and was a Buddhist when he returned to Europe, but all the while he was a Catholic priest; what is important is the God-experience and not the religious compartment.'

Let me repeat, for the benefit of the young, that I am Christian, Syrian and Orthodox but my God is neither a Syrian nor a Christian nor a member or even a mentor of the Orthodox Church. I am what I am because I was what I was.

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